Biography: Charlie Chaplin

(April 16, 1889 - December 25, 1977)

Charlie Chaplin, who brought laughter to millions worldwide as the silent "**Little Tramp**" clown, had the type of deprived childhood that one would expect to find in a Dickens novel. Born in East Street, Walworth, London on 16 April, 1889, Charles Spencer Chaplin was the son of a music hall singer and his wife. Charlie Chaplin's **parents divorced** early in his life, with his father providing little to no support, either financial or otherwise, leaving his mother to support them as best she could. Chaplin's mother **Hannah** was the brightest spot in Charlie's childhood; formerly an actor on stage, she had lost her ability to perform, and managed to earn a subsistence living for herself, Charlie, and Charlie's older half-brother Sidney by sewing. She was an integral part of Charlie's young life, and he credited her with much of his success. Sadly, she slowly **succumbed to mental illness**, and by the time that Charlie was 7 years old, she was confined to an asylum; Charlie and Sidney were relegated to a workhouse (a government facility for orphaned and abandoned children) -- not for the last time. After 2 months, she was released, and the family was happily reunited, for a time. In later years, she was readmitted for an 8-month stretch later, during which time Charlie lived **with his alcoholic father** and stepmother, in a strained environment.

Charlie Chaplin's first taste of show business

Charlie Chaplin
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Sidney left home first, working first on a sailing ship, and later on the stage, opening the door for Charlie to follow in his footsteps later. Young Charlie felt more alone than ever without the presence of his brother, his closest friend and confidant. However, there was a bright spot as well in Chaplin's 9th year -- he toured with a stage company, the 8 Lancashire Lads, with a kindhearted couple who led the troupe, and gave Chaplin his first taste of stage life. He also met a young Stan Laurel as part of the troupe.

At the age of 12, Charlie's **father died** quite young.

At the age of 14, Charlie's mother is readmitted to **the asylum**, while Sidney is out of town on an extended trip. Charlie provides for himself as best he can, desperate to avoid returning to the workhouse, until Sydney returns home. With Sidney's return, young Chaplin's luck begins to turn for the better. He wins a part in the stage play "**Jim, A Romance of Cockney**" to glowing reviews. Later in the same year, he earns the part of Billy in a stage adaptation of "Sherlock Holmes," again to sterling reviews, and tours with the company playing that part. The tour continues through the next year, and Hannah is again released, seemingly in her right mind. All seems to be going well, until Hannah relapses, and is **institutionalized** for the next 7 years; Charlie is 16 years old.

Charlie Chaplin tours with the Karno troupe, and enters films

Charlie continues in his acting career, as his brother Sidney joins the **Karno troupe**, again opening the way there for Charlie. Charlie joins the Karno troupe the next year, again working alongside Stan Laurel. Two years later, Chaplin (along with the rest of the Karno troupe) tours the **United States' vaudeville circuit**. Two years later, in 1912, Charlie returns with the Karno troupe to the USA, but this time **decides to stay**. The next year, Chaplin leaves the stage to join Mack Sennet's **Keystone Films** Studio, marking a milestone both in his own life and in the history of film.

Charlie Chaplin's famous Tramp character is born

The pace of film making in early Hollywood seems impossible by today's standards. In just two months, Chaplin appeared in the following Keystone films: Making a Living, Kid Auto Races, Mabel's Strange Predicament, Between Showers, A Film Johnnie, Tango Tangles, His Favourite Pastime, Cruel, Cruel Love. Although Chaplin started at the Keystone Company as a bit player, with the introduction of his world-famous tramp character he quickly **exploded into a major star**. By April, at the age of 25, Chaplin directs his first film, 'Twenty Minutes of Love.'

By November of that year, Chaplin is leaving Keystone, having signed an exclusive contract for the newly formed Essanay Film Company. Sidney follows in Charlie's steps this time, and joins the Keystone Company shortly before Charlie left it.

In February of 1915, Chaplin begins work for Essanay, with greater control over his films than ever before -- but not enough to avoid '**creative differences**' with his bosses at Essanay. However, another milestone occurs at the same time -- he meets Edna Purviance, who was to be his leading lady for many of his films, as well as an off-again, on-again romance. At Essanay, Chaplin created many of the classic short films he's best remembered for, including His New Job, A Jitney Elopement, The Tramp, A Night in the Show, and The Immigrant. In February of 1916, Chaplin again jumps to another film company, Mutual, where he continues to create some of his finest shorts, including The Floorwalker, The Vagabond, The Pawnshop, Behind the Screen, and The Rink. In both his personal and professional life, his inner circle began to expand. He first hired Henry Bergman (the 'heavy villain' in so many of Chaplin's films), as well as hiring Tom Harrington as his personal secretary, a position which he kept for many decades, becoming Chaplin's right-hand man in many respects.

Charlie Chaplin with Dog
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Desiring even more creative control, Chaplin began building his own studio in the fall of 1917, and signed with yet another studio, **First National**. For the first time, Chaplin has complete control over every step of his films. For First National, Chaplin continues to create classic shorts: A Dog's Life, Shoulder Arms, and The Bond. In 1918, he also marries for the first (but not the last) time, to **Mildred Harris**.

Charlie Chaplin's woman troubles

Charlie begins in his personal life a **recurring, destructive pattern** -- he chases (and frequently marries) a young woman, loses interest in her (being consumed by his creative energies), goes through a messy breakup (or divorce), typically impacting his professional life, and then repeats the pattern. In November of that year, his first true love, Hetty Kelly, dies -- although Chaplin doesn't find this out until he visits England in 1921.

Charlie Chaplin - pathos and comedy

1919 was a year of both great gains and losses for Charlie. One of his most popular short films, Sunnyside, is released -- demonstrating a degree of both pathos and comedy mixed together to a high degree. Chaplin had been slowly moving the Little Tramp towards this more balanced characterization for some time -- and now Charlie the tramp is maturing. Sadly, Charlie the human being suffered a terrible loss, as his & Mildred's infant child is born, horribly deformed, and dies after only 3 days. Charlie sought solace in his work, alienating his wife even more. In that same year, he formed **United Artists** with his closest friend Douglas Fairbanks and Fairbanks' wife, screen legend Mary Pickford -- in a successful effort to keep the major studios from monopolizing and controlling all aspects of production. In December of that year, A Day's Pleasure was released, dealing with a happy family trying to enjoy a quiet day at the beach -- somewhat ironically, considering the state of Charlie Chaplin's personal life at that stage. But something new was on the horizon -- Charlie Chaplin had begun production of The Kid.

Charlie Chaplin - The Kid

Charlie Chaplin with Kid ...
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The Kid was Charlie Chaplin's **first full-length movie**. It, more than anything else to that date, made Chaplin a living legend. It took over a year to produce, and was an incredible success for Chaplin, both financially and artistically.

Over the next year, Charlie Chaplin continues working on The Kid, as his perfectionism takes more and more time in creating his film masterpieces. Sadly, he and Mildred Harris divorce at this time, in one of the most bitter Hollywood divorces seen up to this point. But there is light at the end of the tunnel, as The Kid is finally released to unanimous praise, and record box office success, in 1921. Charlie Chaplin had gone through a very difficult time, and needed time to relax, and renew himself. He took his first vacation, returning to Europe to crowds that were beyond his wildest dreams. In a bittersweet moment, he learns of Hetty Kelly's death from her brother while in London. More cheerfully, he begins several friendships in London that become lifelong, including with the famous writer H. G. Welles. In addition, he and Sydney brought their mother, Hannah, to the States, where she lived the rest of her life, under the best medical care that Charlie's money could provide.

Returning to America, and to his work, Charlie quickly produces his next film, The Idle Class. Charlie begins working on his next film, Payday, in his professional life, and meets the European actress Pola Negri, with whom he has an off-again, on-again romantic relationship that goes on for nearly a year. Over the course of that year, Charlie Chaplin releases his next film, The Pilgrim (about an escaped convict who takes on the role of a preacher to avoid recapture), and prepares for his first dramatic film, A Woman of Paris, designed to catapult Edna Purviance into her own career. Audiences by now had associated the name Charlie Chaplin with comedy, however, and were not expecting serious fare. Although a good movie, it died at the box office -- and gave Charlie Chaplin his first commercial failure.

Charlie Chaplin - The Gold Rush
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Charlie Chaplin in The Gold Rush - and in a family way

That was reversed by his next film, one of the classics of the silent era -- The Gold Rush. It is the story of the Little Tramp going north to the Alaskan gold rush, and by more luck than skill both getting the girl and becoming rich. It is touching, poignant, and hilarious, containing some of Chaplin's most famous routines. However, early in the filming of the movie, Chaplin's leading lady, **Lita Grey**, had to be replaced by **Georgia Hale** -- since Charlie Chaplin had married Lita Grey, and she had become pregnant. She was only 16 at the time.

Chaplin worried incessantly about his young wife's pregnancy -- had felt that the death of his first son was, in some way, his fault. Thankfully, in 1925 this child was born healthy -- Charles Spencer Chaplin Jr. Charlie had qualms about naming the child after himself, fearing that the boy would live in his father's shadow, but he gave way to Lita. That same year, The Gold Rush (read review) was released to critical acclaim and great financial success. Some believe it is Chaplin's finest film. Ironically, there was a third birth that year that would become integral to Chaplin years later -- Oona O'Neil was born.

The next year, Charlie began work on his next film, The Circus (read review). As John McCabe noted in his excellent biography of Charlie Chaplin, The Circus was not the equal of The Gold Rush, but was a good film in its' own right -- and, given the circumstances under which it was filmed, it was a miracle that it was even palatable.

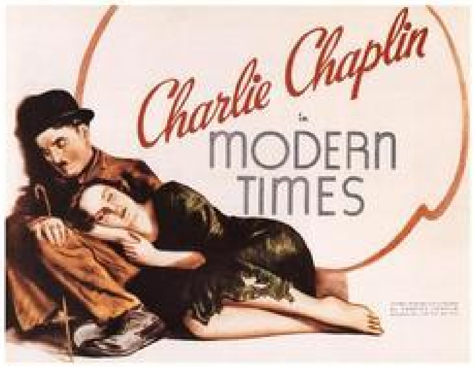
Charlie Chaplin in a messy divorce

Despite the birth of a second son, Sidney, in 1926, Charlie & Lita's marriage broke apart -- bitterly, and publicly. Charges went back and forth, with newspapers gleefully displaying the details of the Chaplins' marital woes. Charlie Chaplin always refused to discuss his marriage with Lita; Lita, however, wrote a one-sided account, Wife of the Life of the Party. The divorce ended in 1927 with a record-breaking divorce settlement of $825,000. The stress was enough to permanently turn Charlie Chaplin's hair prematurely white. During all of this, Charlie continued to film The Circus (read review), one of his lesser-known, but best, films.

In 1928, Charlie Chaplin released The Circus to popular acclaim, and also received a special Oscar for his work on the film as director, actor, producer. Sadly, this positive year was also crushingly negative, as Charlie's beloved mother died. Chaplin's life continued to be centered around his work, even in his grief, as he began work on his next film towards the end of that year: City Lights (read review).

Charlie Chaplin - the end of the Tramp

City Lights, released in 1931, was Charlie Chaplin's first non-silent film. But it still was not a 'talking' picture. Chaplin included the musical soundtrack, and used sound effects, but nobody spoke in the picture yet. This was a major gamble for Chaplin, since sound pictures had now become the standard. But it was a gamble that paid off handsomely. The movie was both a financial and critical success, and many believe it to be one of Chaplin's finest films, if not his best.



Modern Times
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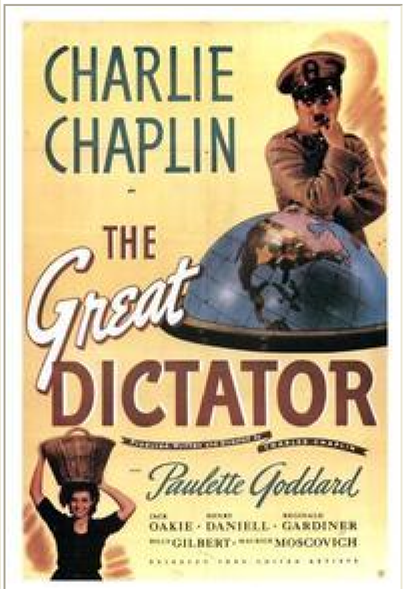
After City Lights, Charlie Chaplin did something totally out of character; he took a vacation. Actually, Chaplin took vacations quite frequently, both to refresh himself and to find new ideas for his films. But this was his first extended vacation, away from creating a new movie for nearly two years. He talks at length about this time in his autobiography (My Autobiography), including globe-trotting and how he was nearly assassinated in Japan; but perhaps his most pivotal moment was in 1932, when he met Paulette Goddard, who would costar in his next film -- Modern Times -- which would be the Tramp's final film.

After the release of Modern Times, Charlie Chaplin and Paulette Goddard were married in secret, while on vacation in the Orient. Upon his return, Charlie began his most audacious comedy yet - The Great Dictator, making fun of Adolph Hitler himself. Hitler, in many ways, was a natural subject for Chaplin to satirize. Hitler, it is said, adopted his mustache in imitation of Charlie. Both were smaller men, of slight build. And Chaplin saw the ideas that Hitler was championing as horrible, evil; and Charlie was determined to show the world what he saw.



The Great Dictator
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Charlie Chaplin attacks Hitler in The Great Dictator

The Great Dictator was Charlie Chaplin's first truly talking picture, and when it was finally released in 1940, it was a worldwide sensation. Many people mistakenly think that the character of the **Jewish Barber** in the film is the Tramp, but Charlie Chaplin was adamant that they are different characters. Although the barber uses many of the Tramp's mannerisms, he is also clearly an individual in his own right. And the barber is far more long-winded, as the famous "Look Up, Hannah" speech at the end of the movie reminds us.

Charlie Chaplin - un-American?

In the same year that Charlie Chaplin began working on The Great Dictator, the House Un-American Committee begins investigating Charlie. At first glance, there seems to be no reason for this -- until the second glance. Earlier Chaplin had done his patriotic part in raising money for the war effort, alongside his long time friends Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford -- raising large amounts of money for the war. Charlie was a lifelong pacifist, but he was also a realist who saw that the aggression of the Axis powers had to be stopped. In many ways, Chaplin was politically naive -- such as speaking at fund raisers for the Communist USSR, whom Chaplin simply saw as our allies in the fight. And by suggesting that America immediately open a two front war to help our "friends" in the Soviet Union. These were some of the reasons that the government began keeping tabs on the immigrant film maker (although he worked for all of these years in America, he maintained his British citizenship, and **had no intention of becoming an American citizen**).

1942 was a very busy year for Charlie Chaplin, at least in his personal life. Paulette Goddard, co-star of **Modern Times** and **The Great Dictator**, divorced Chaplin, and went on to be a star in her own right. In that same year, Charlie met another young lady, whom he falls deeply, and permanently, in love with -- Oona O'Neil. Oona, although young, is mature beyond her years -- perhaps from having grown up in the household of her father, **Eugene O'Neil**, the famous playwright. Eugene O'Neil was opposed to having his daughter date Charlie Chaplin; given Chaplin's track record to date, one can hardly blame him. In addition, Chaplin meets another young lady that year, whose relationship to Chaplin would almost seem to confirm the playwright's suspicions -- Joan Barry.

By all accounts, **Joan Barry** was a troubled young woman, who had some talent for acting. She had met Charlie Chaplin, who had given her a screen test for a role, but did not hire her for any of his movies. Although they dated on and off, nothing serious came of it. But in Joan Barry's mind, it was very serious -- serious enough that she breaks into Chaplin's home later that year, armed with a gun. Charlie eventually talked her out of any violence, got her to leave quietly, and then called the police, resulting in a **restraining order** that should have served to keep her out of Charlie Chaplin's life.

Charlie Chaplin in the paternity suit

However, two things happened that next year that prevented that from happening. First was **Joan Barry's pregnancy**; she named Charlie Chaplin as the father. Second, Charlie married Oona O'Neil -- and, in a very real sense, they lived happily ever after. The couple truly loved each other, were devoted to each other, and grew closer as time went on.

In the more immediate term, Charlie Chaplin denied being the father of Joan Barry's child, and a blood test proved his innocence. However, the blood test was inadmissable in the California court at the time, and a jury of his peers ordered Chaplin to **pay child support**. (This is recreated quite well in the 1992 'Chaplin' movie starring Robert Downey, and is highly recommended viewing).

In 1946, the first of Oona and Charlie Chaplin's children, Michael, is born. Over the years, he will have 7 more siblings (Josephine, Victoria, Eugene, Jane, Annette and Christopher). Charlie also begins his next film, a very great departure from anything Charlie has ever attempted -- the dark comedy Monsieur Verdoux .

Monsieur Verdoux is a very dark comedy, in which the title character, a fired bank clerk, makes his living by marrying rich older women and then killing them for their money. Charlie Chaplin used it to make a statement about the paradox of killing millions in war is virtuous, for the winning side, but killing individuals is a crime. Although it has moments both humorous and engaging, it was not the fare that the public was expecting from Chaplin, and it did not do well domestically, although it did well overseas, and Chaplin made a tidy profit from it. He also used Edna Purviance on screen for the last time, essentially as an extra.

Charlie Chaplin's final films

In 1951, Charlie Chaplin made **one of his finest films**, and one of his least well known - Limelight. Limelight is the story of a formerly great dance hall tramp clown, Calvero (portrayed by Chaplin) on a downward spiral, contrasting with a young dancer on her way to fame - into the spotlight. A funny, poignant film, it also teamed two of the great clowns of the silent era, Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin, for the first and only time.

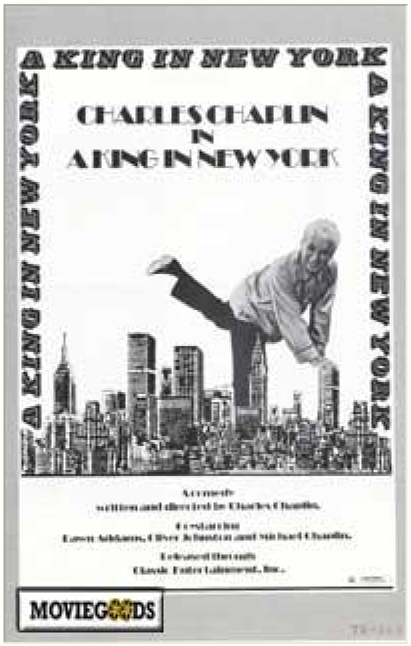
Limelight did not do well at American movie houses, largely due to the false rumors that Chaplin was a communist or communist sympathizer, as well as an organized protest by various unions resulting in theaters refusing to show the film. As a result, it was not seen widely in the United States of America for decades. Years later, when it finally played in Los Angeles, it was nominated for the Best Music Academy Award -- and won.

Charlie Chaplin in Exile

After Limelight, Charlie took another vacation to England, wanting to show his new wife and children his native country. Upon leaving the territorial waters of the United States of America, Charlie Chaplin received a cable, informing him that the State Department had rescinded his reentry permit -- effectively locking him out of the country as an undesirable alien. There were many reasons for this -- Chaplin's unorthodox political views, the false accusation that he was a Communist, and not least of all, money. There would have been an attempt by the federal government to seize Chaplin's assets, which were enormous. However, his wife Oona returned to the United States, and promptly took all of the liquid assets, as well as liquidating everything she could -- leaving the government without a penny for its' trouble.

Charlie Chaplin was not, however, a man without a country. He was still a citizen of Great Britain, but he did not desire to live there. After the stress of the situation had been dealt with, the Chaplins relocated to Vevey, Switzerland in 1953, where they lived for the remainder of their lives together. After their death, it has been turned into an international Charlie Chaplin museum.

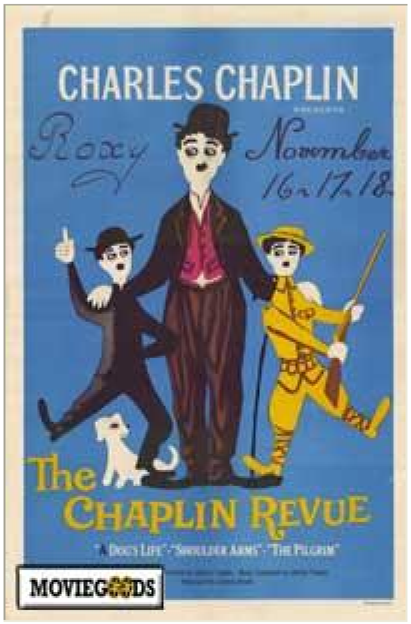
In 1954, Oona renounced her U.S. citizenship, casting her lot with her husband. And, ironically, Charlie Chaplin was awarded World Peace Council Prize in that same year. In the next year, he resumes doing what he does best -- making comedies.


A KING IN NEW YORK
A KING IN NEW YORK
A KING IN NEW YORK
CHARLES CHAPLIN
IN
A KING IN NEW YORK
MOVIEGOODS

His next film, A King In New York, was a biting indictment of modern society. In it, he played the role of King Shadov, an European monarch in exile, who comes to New York to promote the peaceful uses of nuclear power. Along the way, he pokes fun at the Red Scare, commercials, movies, celebrities, movie magazines, and life in urban America. Filmed in England, it was the last film in which he was on screen as a major character.

In the same year that A King In New York premiered, Charlie Chaplin's half-brother Wheeler Dryden died. Wheeler had been introduced to Charlie many years before by Edna Purviance -- Charlie had been unaware of him. Wheeler was a competent, though not gifted, actor, and idolized his famous brother. He began to work for Charlie in various roles and positions, and years later served as Charlie's assistant director on The Great Dictator and Monsieur Verdoux. Jerome Robinsons' photo journal, Charlie and Me, contains some interesting anecdotes about Charlie's lesser-known sibling.

Chaplin's professional pace seemed to be slowing down, to an outside observer. After all, he was now 69 years old. However, Charlie was not finished working. He had been reediting some of his earlier movies, and composing new music for some of them. Charlie was musical by nature as well as profession, and he wrote some of the most enduring melodies of the century -- not least among them the song 'Smile'. However, before he could release his reedited movies, now narrated by Charlie Chaplin himself, death claimed another old friend -- Edna Purviance died in 1958. And, to add insult to injury, Chaplin's name was removed from Los Angeles' Walk of Fame.

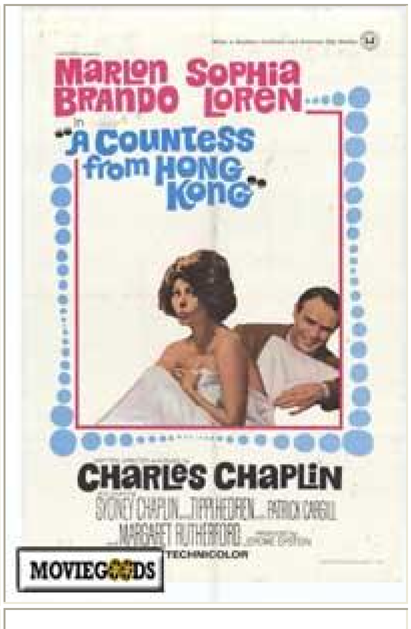

CHARLES CHAPLIN
Roxy
November 16, 17, 18
The CHAPLIN REVUE
"A DOG'S LIFE" - "SHOULDER ARMS" - "THE PILGRIM"
MOVIEGOODS

In 1959, the Chaplin Revue was released, to worldwide acclaim. Charlie Chaplin continued his work in Switzerland, writing and composing, and raising his growing brood of children. In 1964 he published his autobiography, which he humbly titled 'My Autobiography.' It was an interested look into the life of Charlie Chaplin, although incomplete -- he mentioned his marriage to Lita Grey in only one sentence.

In 1965, death again intruded on Charlie Chaplin's family life, as his older brother Sidney died. This was a strong blow to Chaplin, second only to the loss of him mother in 1928. Sidney had been his brother, friend, companion, confidant and business manager all rolled into one. Charlie grieved deeply for the loss of his beloved brother.

But Charlie Chaplin did not stop working. After dealing with his grief as best he could, in 1966 Charlie began work on his next, and final, movie, A Countess in Hong Kong. It was a number of firsts for Chaplin -- he did not star in the film, and only had a small, Hitchcock-esque walk-on scene as a porter. Instead, he directed two of Hollywood's largest stars of the day, Marlon Brando and Sophia Loren. Although an interesting idea, it was not a hit at the box office when released in 1967.

In 1968, Chaplin was now 79 years old. It is not surprising that more and more of his friends and coworkers died -- for example, his longtime cameraman and assistant Rollie Totheroh died the previous year. However, Charlie Chaplin's oldest son, Charles Chaplin Jr., died. Again, Charlie worked through his grief, and threw himself into his work. He was preparing a new film, 'The Freak', about a young girl who sprouts wings, as a vehicle for his daughter -- but it never went past the planning stages.


MARLON BRANDO
SOPHIA LOREN
in
"A COUNTESS from HONG KONG"
CHARLES CHAPLIN
SYDNEY CHAPLIN...TIPPI HEDREN...PATRICK CARGILL
...MARGARET RUTHERFORD
TECHNICOLOR
MOVIEGOODS

In 1972, Charlie Chaplin did something he never thought he would do -- he returned to the United States of America. He was returning to accept a lifetime achievement Academy Award. The foolishness of 20 years previous had been forgotten, and Chaplin was greeted by America with open arms. Correcting another old injustice, Chaplin's name was added again to the 'Walk of Fame' in Los Angeles. Chaplin was also awarded the Golden Lion at that year's Venice Film Festival .

In 1974, Charlie Chaplin published another book, 'My Life in Pictures.' The next year, he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II, and became Sir Charles Spencer Chaplin.

In 1977, Charlie Chaplin passed away, on Christmas Day. He left behind grieving family and friends, and millions of fans worldwide.

Quotes by Charlie Chaplin:

- "To truly laugh, you must be able to take your pain, and play with it!"
- "I remain just one thing, and one thing only -- and that is a clown. It places me on a far higher plane than any politician."
- "Laughter is the tonic, the relief, the surcease for pain"

Check out reviews of some of Chaplin's finest films, including The Gold Rush, The Immigrant, The Kid and Limelight (a personal favorite)

For more images of Chaplin, please check out the Charlie Chaplin Gallery.

Other Charlie Chaplin Resources

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